

Onley, Mary MamaGirl 10.20.03 EDIT

ELAINE F: Today is Monday, October 20th, 2003, and I am on Shell Bridge Road in Painter, Virginia on the eastern shore of Virginia with Pastor Mary Onley, Mama Girl, the artist of paper. Well, I'll let you tell us what exactly it is you do. This is Elaine F., and I am actually doing this as an interview prior to our getting together at the Historical Society in Talbot County in Easton. So, let me go turn off the light. [pause] The thing about these, they have so many buttons but they have a mind of their own. Okay, I'd like to know... I want to make sure I'm getting.

MARY ONLEY: [00:01:23] Okay.

EF: You sound great. Okay, today is Monday, October 20th, 2003, and this is Elaine F., and I am at the home and studio of Mary Onley, Mama Girl, on Shell Beach Road in Painter, Virginia in Accomack County. And we are here to talk about her life and her work. So, what I really want to talk about is, tell me one thing to start with, first of all, tell me who you are. Give me your name.

MO: [00:02:01] My name is Mary E. Onley, known as Mama Girl. And I'm from the Eastern Shore of Virginia, and I was raised and born on the Eastern Shore. And I worked as a

crew leader for 20 years, and from that, I became an artist.

EF: What's a crew leader?

MO: [00:02:32] A crew leader is someone that's the overseer over fields and getting the work done.

EF: And what kind of crops were you working with?

MO: [00:02:44] I worked with all types of vegetables. There was no vegetable that I didn't work with. And it ranging in like collard greens, tomatoes, cucumbers, squash, beans, green beans.

EF: Now, how did you get started... first of all, tell me how your people got to this area, in Virginia. Do you know how long they've been here and how they got to Shell Bridge Road, or this part of the county?

MO: [00:03:26] Okay. My family originated from [inaudible], and that's about not quite two miles from where I live right now. And they got here, oh, my uncle... my oldest uncle, before he died, he was a 101 and he was part of, he was a slave, and he also was a gentleman that if, he hurt, he operated on his self, and he took the bones out of his toes because his toes had got frostbitten, and he just put a sock on them and it cured up. And then, from that, that's all I know according from there. And I remember living with him until he passed. And most of my family was

spiritual people, and they sung and always praise the Lord at all times. And from there, my grandparents raised me. I was their only child and from there, from being raised by my grandparents, God gave me the opportunity that I could repay the favor by looking after them until they passed, and when I started in the art business, really, being an artist, I didn't even know that I was even doing artwork, and it came from Mary Miller of Eastville and her husband said to me, "Say, you know this is art?" And I really didn't know and so at that time, they were going out to a show and then let me know when they get back, that they will call me, which they did, and I met them at their residence, and when I met them at their residence, they said, "You are an artist," and I said, "Artist?" And I never accepted being an artist until about, I would say, about a good two years ago.

EF: What year would that have been?

MO: [00:05:35] That was in about 2000, when I accepted as being an artist. And going on, I was more shamefaced, and didn't care for being around a whole lot of people. So, the first time I ever got a chance, really, to be around a whole lot of people was a lady came out of Chincoteague, I can't think of her name, and said that these teachers wanted to meet me. Okay, and so, this teacher came from Chincoteague

and she called me first, and put an appointment, asked me could her and another friend come. And at the main time, she was going... a meeting was going on somewhere, and she showed up with, I think, three vans, two cars, a load of other teachers. And I said, my friend was from Florida named Dorothy Ivins, and I said, "No way in the world all of these people is coming in this house." And she said, "Why not?" I said, "I just can't stand it." And I thought I was going to have a heart attack. When I went to the door she said, "We all don't have to come in because I just said two of us was coming," and at the main time something came over me and I said, "Just everybody come in, come in." And so, they all came in and they began to talk about the artwork and stuff, how nice it was, and I began to talk to them and I was more talking about my son then I was talking about anyone, my son named Alvin Reiner, which he had taken art under one of the teachers and they wanted him to know ... wanted me to know how could I go by getting him back to do art? Because he was such a great artist and she said, "He'd done so much for me in drawing pictures and stuff for me when I had to do something." And I said, "I don't know," I said, "But I'll talk to him." And then, it went on from there and we talked about different things and they kept looking and looking. And then, it was time for

them to go and then when they left I said, "Phew, oh boy, I don't know how I did that." But that's when I began not to be so much ashamed of talking in front of people. And as of now, I still don't care too much for pictures.

EF: Well, tell me this. What got you started making art? And tell me about the art you were making when you started.

MO: [00:08:10] Okay. When I first started making art, I started with newspapers, clothes hangers, cardboard boxes, and the reason why I started with all of that, newspaper, I was getting them every day and lots of them, and then the cardboard boxes, people was giving them away and so I was taking them. And then, the clothes hangers, my husband was getting uniforms, and I didn't want to waste anything. And so, I began to save up all of that. The only thing I didn't have to work with was glue. That was the only thing at that time I had to go and buy. And so, I said, "Well, Lord," I said, "If you only give me something," in the meantime while I asked the Lord to give me something to work with, was because I had taken with a real bad illness and they really didn't know what was wrong with me at that time, and really, the doctors thought that I would have been dead in eight months. And the doctor said I would never be able to work anymore. And my husband always had to walk by my side because they didn't even want me to walk

by myself. And I asked the Lord, I said, "If you give me something to do I will do what you say and go where you send me. And yes, it is rough, but I promise." And so, after that I was sitting down one day because the clothes hangers, I had punched a hole in my hand with them so I knew right off the bat I couldn't use them, and the cardboard boxes, they were hard to deal with it, and so, I asked the Lord one day I started in the evening, praying and asking him if he would just let me work with the newspaper and glue that I had. And so, from there, I started trying to make a doll baby. But I didn't understand, because I started with the doll baby's legs first, that he were showing me how to make the legs and I left from the legs to the body, then from the body to the head, and the arms came last. Then I said, "Well, Lord," I said, "It would be bad to look and see a naked person." I said, "I need to know how to put clothes on this doll." And so, right from then, and even though I taught me tell from 2:00 to 3:00 the next morning to finish it, but at that time, the next morning my husband says, "When are you coming to bed?" And I said, "Thank you, Lord, I don't finish. I'm ready to come to bed." And so, that's how I really got started. I started by praying and asking God to give me something because the doctor said I would never be

able to work again. And I said, "This one time, I need to make the doctor wrong."

EF: What was the first piece that you made?

MO: [00:11:15] The first piece that I made with newspaper, clothes hangers and cardboard boxes, was like a great, big Indian doll, with about 100 dreadlocks on a head, I mean, I would call them plaits, where some would say dreadlocks, and some would say braids. That was the Indian. And then, she had a big old hat, like a scarf on it, on her head, that was the first piece. Then the second piece from nothing but newspaper and glue, is I made just a tall Africa American doll with all types of colors.

EF: Is this the one sitting right over here?

MO: [00:12:05] No, that's the first piece. That's the first piece with the newspaper, clothes hangers, and cardboard boxes, that I made with that. And then, the second piece that I made, I sold it about two years ago.

EF: So, why do you hold on to this one?

MO: [00:12:26] Well, that piece is my heart, and then, I mean that piece and my mother, I promised my mother that that piece I wouldn't sell it. And because right after I sold it, for about two years, she kept it in her house. And then, when I'd taking it back and I said, "Mom, I'll take it over to my house," she said, "You can't sell that piece."

You can't sell that piece." And I mean, I had a lot of offers. I had people that came my shop and say, "If I can't buy that piece, I won't buy any," and that was fine. They walked out with nothing because I wouldn't sell that piece.

EF: Where do you get your ideas?

MO: [00:13:10] From the spirit. And what I mean by from the spirit is because I heard, it sounds like voices to me, it sounds like a voice to me that talks to me. I can be sitting up, then all at once, it just, the spirit, and lot of times I done looked over my shoulder to see who's standing there. But it just tells me what to make and how to make it. And even as of right now in this, I'm going on my seventh year, I still can pick up the newspaper and get the glue, and don't know what to do with it. And if I once make something, I'm like, "How do I make this? I don't know how to make it." And then I begin to talk to the spirit. "I just don't know how to make it," and then the next thing I know, I'm making it.

EF: When I first met you, you were making a lot of chickens.

MO: [00:14:08] Well, it's whatever the spirit gives me to make. If the spirit comes and said, "Chicken," then I make chickens until the spirit says it. And I go about everything the same way. Whatever, if I need to make

something and whatever the spirit is saying, that's what I make. And other than telling you why, I don't know why, I just follow the spirit, and it seemed like just by following the spirit, that's my joy, too. That's my joy of getting up in the morning. When I get up in the morning I start off with prayer and the whole time I'm making, I'm praying or praising. And I go through that all day long, praying and praising. And it's kind of hard to even talk when I'm working because I'm more like talking to the spirit when I'm working. And so, that's why it's hard to even explain as I work because I'm talking to the spirit while the spirit is explaining to me.

EF: Tell me about some of the pieces that you made that have really meant a lot to you.

MO: [00:15:21] Oh, most of the pieces that mean a lot to me, some would say, "Why do watermelon mean a lot to me?" I always love watermelon. Watermelon has always been one of the meals that I could eat three times a day in the summer, in the spring, and in the fall. And one day, I was just sitting up and it was like, "I need you to make a watermelon tree." And I'm like, "A watermelon tree? Watermelons don't grow on trees. Why should I make this watermelon tree?" And something said, "You have to make this watermelon tree." And so, I have branched out from

watermelon trees to watermelon fish, watermelon chicken, there's nothing that I don't make in watermelon. And that's one of the pieces. And the other piece is the Garden of Eden, is one of the main pieces that I love to make. And that's representing the forbidden fruit, but would I do, the forbidden fruit that I see is watermelon. [laughs] And I make some with apples and most of them, some of them I put half apples and half watermelon slices on them. And then, the other piece is the Noah's ark. And why these pieces mean so much, seems like it was just a challenge that God had put before me, and I'm like, "I don't know how it's going to be done," and I'm like, "Well, you're not supposed to know anyway. If the spirit is telling you, you're not supposed to know. The spirit is supposed to know." And so, a lot of pieces I made, it's a challenge because most of them, once I start from one year to the other, I don't go back and make those same pieces. Some of those pieces I don't make for five years, and some of them I have never made again. But each year is like a challenge. The spirit shows me a different way of doing all together, my pieces are made different each year, and the spirit does show me, and I'm like, "I don't know how it's done; I can't really explain it. All I know the

spirit give it and soon as I finish with it, the spirit takes it away."

EF: You have a lot of different sizes of things, like I know that sometimes I'll be here and animals are large, and sometimes I'll be here and they fit inside your hand. What makes you change the sizes?

MO: [00:17:52] Okay, the spirit will let me know each year just how large to make them. And this year, it said, "Cut down." This year it said, "Cut down." The only pieces that I have been making that's real large for this year have been hanging pieces. And there was like, oh, the Last Supper, and Noah's Ark. They are the biggest pieces that I made this year. And I made a great big bulldog for a lady this year. But most of the time, it takes me about two to three months to get started on these big pieces. And then, when I get started, it's like, leave from them and go to something else. But if the spirit gives me something to make, even if that's the first of the year, and the spirit won't allow me to make anything until I start on whatever it gives me.

EF: So now, some of your ideas aren't your ideas. They come from your, do you call them your customers? Tell me about the people who come to order things are the people who come here and how that affects what you create.

MO: [00:19:15] Okay. Now, okay, some of the ideas come from my customers, okay, I can say like one ordered a flying pig, and I don't know how the other artists that's in the Artisan Guild Club thought that I knew how to make a flying pig because I didn't, and so, but they assigned her to me and said, "If anybody can make you a flying pig it can be Mama Girl." And so when she called me and I said, "I know they didn't do this to me, about a flying pig," and so, I said this to her I said, "If you don't mind, ma'am, I can't tell you when I can make this flying pig, it's going to take a lot of praying, because I don't know how to make the flying pig, and whenever the spirit allows me to make it then I'll make the flying pig. You give me your phone number and I'll call you." And so, that's how I go about doing it when somebody sees something that they want me to make that is not in the shop or that I haven't made before, and so, that's how I go about it, even when people order, I let them know that I have to pray on it and before I could make it. And one little child asked me for a frog and I think I prayed on that frog from six months to a year before I even could get the vision of a frog. And the only thing about it, I can look in the books, I can look in every type of book there is, that's the same thing somebody

want and can't make it, until the spirit gives me the vision of how to make it.

EF: How do people know about you? How do people find you?

MO: [00:20:58] Well, some is from the word of mouth. Some is from other friends, and some is from television. I have been on television about three times. And is there some just go into someone else's house, and they'll say, "Where did that piece come? I haven't seen a piece like that before," and they'll say, "Mama Girl," and give them my phone number. But most of the time, just about ever since I've been in the art business, every year, I have new customers. I have some same customers, but not too often, even after I closed my shop in Exmore, all together new customers started. And I have said a couple times myself, "How in the world are these people finding me?" Because I live back in the woods, and I said, "How do people find me back in the woods?" And the time that I did move from my shop it was right funny because most of my customers were really worried about me, saying, "I don't know how she's going to make it now because nobody can find her." And when I had to go into stores, they would even let me know they were concerned because they would say it to me. And only thing I would say, I wouldn't say anything to them, and I said, "Well, I don't know." The only thing I could

say to myself, I said, "If they only knew who told me to move back home." And so, finally, I said it to, I think it was a young man, I said, "If you only knew who told me to go back home, you wouldn't say anything," I said, "Because this person," I said... when I talk about God, I name him, he's a person to me because that's the way I talk. I said, "This person that told me, he knows everything," I said, "And he's told me to move back home. He didn't tell me why I had to go back home. He didn't say anything. He just said, 'Move back home,' and I obey it." And so, after being obedient I sold my second biggest piece once I moved back home, my second biggest piece since... before I even opened shop, I sold my first biggest piece and then right from there, my sales tripled and everything once I moved back home, and I was just being obedient. I didn't know why I had to come back, but now I know, because my father taken really bad off and I had to be the one to look after him. Then after, that my mother. And so, now I'm still, I have my shop studio at home, and I'm still working and this same person that sent me back, the one that I consider my father, is the one that's still sending people out to me.

EF: How did you get involved in a store? I think that's so interesting.

MO: [00:24:05] Well, how I got... This was really funny. I had a vision of being in a shop, and a friend of mine named [Donna Loffman?], she had a pocketbook. She had a pocketbook shop right next to it. And so, she said, "If I ever heard of anything, I would love for you to be next to me, so I'm going to let you know." And as soon as that building was empty, she called me on the phone and I had the flu so bad I didn't know what to do, and she says, "It's empty, here's the number, call this gentleman and say can you rent it," and I called him and I said, "I'm so sick, I don't know what to do I can't even leave the house," and he said, "Donna Loffman has been telling me about you," and he said, "I'll wait till you get well in order to see you. And yes, I will not rent it to anyone but you." And so, he rented it to me and I stayed in it for two and a half years. As a matter of fact, I stayed in it until the spirit came and said I had to come back home. And the time the spirit came to me and said I had to move back, I was getting ready to go out to a show in, I think, Alexandria, Virginia. And in the meantime, for going out to this show in Alexandria, Virginia, it gave me a lot of time to pray. And so, that was over the weekend, I left on a

Wednesday and so I came back it was Sunday night, and on that Wednesday of the same week, I was moving out.

EF: And I guess no regrets.

MO: [00:25:44] And no regrets. No regrets. I can still say I'm still having fun. My work is fun. It's an opportunity for me to pray. It's an opportunity for me to get in touch, in touch with the father. And as the business began to grow, that's when the ministry came. And I often said during the time, "Lord, is this a ministry? This art is a ministry," I said, "Some reason why this change has been made," and now I'm just learning that the art even part of my ministry, too, that that's how I explain to people when I go out on the field or go into church, how, what God can do with somebody that I didn't finish high school, never got a chance to go to college because even as a child I'd taken real bad off and couldn't walk and really couldn't control myself, my body, or somebody else had to hold my head up and everything, and it seemed like my memory wasn't good. My memory was just... I couldn't remember very much. And so, I really didn't know what stage I was at. A lot of times, I couldn't remember my family and even being grown and in the art business now, I have that

problem. But thanks be to God that is under control, and so I often say, "Well, Lord, if I had finished school," and I said, "But you made me to be what you want me to be and thank you."

EF: It seems to me you've got a pretty good memory. And you certainly move pretty well.

MO: [00:27:38] Well, thanks be to my father. That's why I do it because there was time when I couldn't hold my own head up. My muscles were that weak. I couldn't walk. I was in a wheelchair. And matter fact, I didn't have muscles in my jaw to even chew my own food up. And so, people had to... I was just depending on other people to look after me.

EF: So, what made all the difference? Did you have any kind of treatment or did you...

MO: [00:28:09] Well, thanks to Lord, to my father again, because I didn't have any treatments. The only thing was wrong what they really found wrong with me, I was allergic, I had allergies real, real bad, and whatever the allergy was, it really would set me off, it would make me be... I looked just like somebody that was dying. And so, and not only did I look like somebody was dying, I could hear you, you could talk to me and

I could hear everything you say and couldn't respond to you.

EF: And you don't even know what you're allergic to, do you?

MO: [00:28:47] Well, right now, the only thing the doctor's ever said to me that I was allergic to so much that they would rather not even test me because I was allergic to so much, and they said, but as I eat food and it makes me sick, don't go back to that food or if I go outside and I know that the grass, don't go back to that, certain plants, certain flowers, and a lot... I can't... perfume, I can't stand perfume and there's so much other stuff that I haven't even come across yet that I'm allergic to.

EF: How do you deal with your paints?

MO: [00:29:25] You know, I thank my father for that. The paint has never made me sick and just last year the doctor was thinking that the paint was making me sick because I had taken real sick and when they found out that the paint wasn't making me sick, it was because I had moved back home and I was doing outside a lot. And so, trees, grass and trees is my main problem. And so, I often said to the Lord, I said, "Well, now my mother's gone, my father's gone, and do you really

want me to stay where I'm at?" Because even when I moved to Exmore, I didn't have as much trouble with my allergies because I was only home when night came. And then, when night came, I was inside. And so, but being here most of the time and I'm a person that being a crew leader, that made me, I love the outside. I never cared for inside. And so, but I'm learning to stay inside when I have to.

EF: Tell me about your ministry. When did that get started and how did that get started? Were you trained? Did you go somewhere?

MO: [00:30:43] My ministry started about in; I think in 2000. And it just was out of the blue. I was going to a church and I didn't even know, I had my shop in Exmore, and I didn't even know what was going on, but it was just, the spirit came to me and said what I had to go and say to a minister, and I didn't understand it. And in the meantime, before I even did that, I was in this church and something says, "Stand up." And when I stood up, it just came out my mouth, "I got a church. I'll be a minister of a church in Painter, right there where I live at." And then, when I sat down, I'm like, "Oh my gracious, I just made a fool out of myself, why did that come out my mouth? I

don't know what I'm saying." And so, and I really didn't know. And so, I came home, I told my mother, I said, "I just made a fool out of myself," and she said, "Well, we'll see." And then, after that, I was already going to this church and the spirit came and told me that I had to take a message to the minister. And out of the blue moon, I prayed it on it for two weeks because I didn't want to do it and it was this gentleman came, and when this gentleman came from Jersey, I might would know him if I see him now, and I might not. And he come in the door and I said, "Sir, can you tell me what to do?" And he said, "Ma'am, what's wrong?" I was standing at the door and he said, "What's wrong?" And I said, "I've got to go and tell the minister something and I don't know what to do." He said, "Just do it." And I said to him, "You're no help," I said, "Because I'm scared to death." And he said, "You just go do it. Just go do it." And so, I made an appointment and called a meeting and at the time for the meeting was on a Saturday, and I had a lot of customers that Saturday and I was happy because I said, "Oh, I ain't got to go to that meeting because of all these customers," and by the time close to going to the meeting seemed like

the customers cleared out. I'm on my way to the church, all the way to the church I'm hoping nobody there. Yes, everybody is there. And when I get there I sit down and the pastor says, "You're the one that called the meeting." I said, "Oh my gracious, I can't do it." And so, but I delivered the message from God and by delivering the message, it didn't make people very pleased, but I had did it and I come home with my heart hurting. Then about, I say about two months later, God said, "You have to start out on your own." And I said, "No, I can't start it on my own," I said, "Because who's going to license me?" I said, "I haven't sat underneath any minister that long for anybody to license me," I said, "Because you sent me to that church and I haven't been there that long," and I said, "Now, who's going to license me?" I said, "I don't know how I'm going to get licensed." But he said, "But start out on your own." And I said, "Who's going to come to listen at me in my house to start a church?" And he said to me, I'm referring to he, but I'm referring to the Lord himself, said to me, in the spirit, saying, "How do you think your artwork is being sold?" And I said, "Huh?" He said, "How do you think your artwork is being sold?" He said, "Just

remember. If I didn't send the people, you couldn't sell anything." And he said, "So, I'll send the people to you." And from that day, I started, with no license or anything as a minister. I just started. When I started, I can remember the first Sunday that I had service, there was no one but me and my grandson. And we went in my shop in Exmore and we had service in that shop. And we just praised the Lord in song and did whatever the spirit would lead us to do and then when the service was over, I went to work. I went to work. And then after that, about six months later, there was a minister showed up at my house. They came to look at artwork because a deacon had seen me on television. But after that, she said, "You have the same type of spirit I have." And then, six months later, she ordained me as a minister. And she said, "God said, you don't need to go anywhere. You done already did what you need to do." And I became a minister right from there. And I was the pastor of Greater Harvest Community Church for about, I would say about nine months before God said to me, the spirit said to me, "I didn't call you to be a pastor of a church." And in the meantime, he said, "I didn't call you to be a pastor of a church, I called you to

go out to the churches to talk to the ministers." And I'm like, "What can I tell them smart people?" I said, "Those people have been to college, they've been everywhere. They've got their license through that way," I said, "What can I do?" He said, "Just be obedience. See, you went and told the first one I sent you to, saying you didn't know how that was going to be." And so, for a while I didn't do it because to tell you the truth, I was scared. And so, he said, "Well, you can only hold up your own blessing," and that morning he said that to me, I said, "I'm going." And I have been in different churches all from Norfolk to Eastern Shore, all the way in Salisbury, Maryland, and telling just what the spirit led to me. And so, now I'm at a standstill because the spirit led me to a church on the Eastern Shore, Bethel Baptist in Franktown, and I'm at a standstill there for a while, as being part of the assistant pastor and the prophet of the church, right now. And so, associate minister, all of that is included what I do. And so, when the pastor is not there, I call on the congregation, and I teach the women's and men's ministry and sometimes I teach Bible study when he's not there. And so, right from now, I can't tell you where I'm headed at because

I don't know because I only deal with the spirit and whatever the spirit tells me, that's what I do. I can't say that I will be there permanently, I can't say that. All I know, wherever the spirit leads me, that's what I do.

EF: How does your artwork fit in with your ministry?

MO: [00:37:52] Okay. The artwork fits in with my ministry because at the same time I'm listening in my ministry I'm listening at the spirit, with the artwork I'm listening at the spirit, and my artwork is considered... I will say it's made completely from the spirit, made completely from the spirit, even though people come in and they will say, "Well, we ordered that. How can it be made from the spirit?" And I said be made from the spirit? Because I don't know how to make it. If I make 1,000 chickens, each chicken I start, it takes prayer because I still don't know how to make it because God promised me one thing. As soon as he gives me a pattern, he would take it from me. And so, that means that nothing I make would ever be the same. It might be painted the same but it won't be the same.

EF: Have you changed any of your material since you started? Have you always used the same paints since you started?

MO: [00:38:59] Well, when I first started, I was using all-purpose paint. Then I left from all-purpose paint I went to just acrylic paint. Then when I left from acrylic paint, well I'm still using I didn't leave from acrylic, I'm still suing some in certain things that do, I use all acrylic paint, and some things I use a latex acrylic. And that's even got to do with the spirit is whatever the spirit says I need to paint whatever thing that I'm making it at time with.

EF: Tell me about your mothers and children that you make. I know you make a lot of those.

MO: [00:39:45] My mothers and my babies. I call it my mothers and babies. I make them, well, people most generally say, my mother always said that, "You're just a mother," and I'm a person that I take care of most of, I have taken care of most of my family members that have turned sick, and I'm the one that is a mother to a... there's no child that I won't be a mother to, that I just love being... I love being mother. And I always have loved to be called mother, and I used to always expect my husband to even call me

Mama. And so, I have men with babies, but I don't like them as well, the men with babies like I do the mothers with babies. I enjoy making mothers with babies.

EF: Which ones do you like making the best, the little ones or the big ones?

MO: [00:40:43] All of them. All of them. The only thing about the little ones that I can see the progress of them quicker, but the bigger ones, it's like, "Boy, this sure is slow. I want to see how this is going to turn out." You know? I'm always ready to see how something turns out because I never know they're going to turn out because, like I said, dealing with the spirit, you only know once they turn out. But I have learned that even the pieces that, when I start making them, I always thank my father before they're even finished. I say, "Thank you for such piece that you done brought."

EF: Have you ever made a piece that you didn't feel comfortable with?

MO: [00:41:27] Yes, ma'am. I hid it for about two or three years. I made this piece and I kept it under my table because, what happened to this piece, the spirit had said, I was making something I can't think what I

was making, and the spirit said, "No more." He said, "That's it." And I said, "No, I have to make one more." And I kept on, and I tell you, right today, I think some people in Virginia Beach have this piece and I can't even tell you what it is right today because that piece was the worst piece I ever seen.

EF: What was it, that it was an ugly piece or that it was hard to make?

MO: [00:42:11] It was everything. Hard to make, and it turned out to be, I don't know, because it just turned out to be, and not only that piece, there were two pieces I made like that. And because the spirit said, "Stop," and I didn't stop, it was like, "Well, you won't know what it is, then." And I really... and to tell you the truth, those pieces are hard to sell. I mean, I have a piece right now on my shelf that I kept on messing with it and now I say it's a moose, but that piece has really been hard to sell. And I don't encourage nobody to buy it. [laughs] Because I really don't know what it is, I say it's a moose, but I don't know what it is.

EF: I'll see if I can figure out which one it is. How did you get the name Mama Girl?

MO: [00:43:06] Well, Mama Girl is from a childhood name and to tell you the truth, my grandmother that named me that name at the time that I wanted to ask her, I was bad off in the hospital. She had just came out of the hospital and came out of the hospital to die at home, and I was in the hospital bed, so I never got a chance to ask her. But I do know I have another first cousin with the same nickname, Mama Girl. And the same grandmother named us both. But I can remember my grandmother saying this to me, on her dying bed, and matter fact, I had just came out the hospital and they said that, "Your grandmother wants to see you." And all I can remember is her on her bed saying, "No one will be able to hurt you." That's all I remember. And the next thing I know, she was gone. And what she meant by that; I don't know. I don't know. I couldn't explain it. I don't know.

EF: How old were you when she passed?

MO: [00:44:22] Oh, I was about in the fourth grade. And I really didn't know. I didn't know too much because I really didn't know my parents at that time because I was really sick, I couldn't walk or anything at that time. So really, I'd been sick even... I can remember being sick even as a smaller child and her

and my mother saying, "Oh, my baby is dying now. My baby is dying, now." And so, I went through life, all through my life, even up to grown, as a matter of fact, up to 1990, or it could be even longer, of hearing those words. Because that's how sick I would get. And I would be cold, just as cold as somebody that done left. I mean, I have heard doctors say, "Your feet is cold, clear through your shoes, we can feel it." And so, but for the name Mama Girl, I don't know whether that meant, "Mama's Girl," or what it meant, but all I knew that, and in my mother kept telling me, "Your grandmother really loved you. She really loved you." That's all I know.

EF: Tell me about your grandparents. What was their name?

MO: [00:45:45] Well, my grandparents on my father's side, one was named Mary Bull, but now my grandfather, his name is Fred Bull I never got to meet him because he passed before I was born. But my grandmother on my mother's side, my grandfather was Paul Reed and Mary, and they were the ones that raised me because my mother, she went in New York to work. And so, they raised me. They raised me and two of my cousins together, two boys. That was Leven Reed, and Sammy Moore. They were my cousins that I was raised with.

And so, they raised all three of us. And all three of us is the same age. Our birthdays come different in the year, but all of us were the same age.

EF: When is your birthday?

MO: [00:46:42] My birthday is December 27th.

EF: Where did you live with your grandparents?

MO: [00:46:56] I lived down a place called [Scarborough Neck?] and where I live at now is about, I say about a good five or six miles from where I live at right now.

EF: What kind of place was that?

MO: [00:47:09] It was a nice place, a great big old house, and on a farm.

EF: Did they own it?

MO: [00:47:16] No, they didn't. They didn't have to pay anything because they were working for the same people that lived in the household, and the people were really, really lovely people. They were lovely people that they lived on the farm of.

EF: What was their name?

MO: [00:47:34] The gentleman was named [Ed C. Dual?], and [Dot Dual?].

EF: And how did you get involved in farm work? At what age did you start working?

MO: [00:47:55] You know, it's hard for me to remember that because I stayed sick so much so I didn't get to do a whole lot of work at a young age. I did the work more when I got in my teens because I didn't do very much fieldwork because even if I went in the field I didn't do very much because I was sick at that age.

EF: Did you not have any other brothers and sisters?

MO: [00:48:23] I don't have any brothers or sisters. I'm the only child.

EF: That's unusual isn't it?

MO: [00:48:30] Yes, it is. [laughs]

EF: Well, how did you get over here to Painter?

MO: [00:48:39] Okay. Over here to Painter, my grandparents, the moved from Onancock, that's where my grandfather took ill, to Chesconessex, and Chesconessex is about, I'd say about two miles from me, now. And then, when they moved there, and as I, when I got grown, then I moved down the street from where I'm living at now. And then after I moved from down there, I moved now, my husband and I, we purchased where we live at now, where I live at now.

EF: How did you meet your husband?

MO: [00:49:19] Oh, in the field, working in the field.

EF: Tell me about him. When was that?

MO: [00:49:26] Oh, 1980. Well, I met my first husband, too, working in the field. I've been married twice. My first husband died before he was... well, I met him in school, my first husband in school, but we didn't get mad until a year before he died. And then, he passed and then I met my second husband and then we got married and we stayed married for 19 years before he passed. And I met one in school and one on the farm.

EF: Now, tell me about your children.

MO: [00:50:08] And my children, their names are, the oldest one is a girl, that's Cassandra Reed, and Alvin Reed, David Rogers, and Robert Onley. And I had just those four. And my husband and I, we also, we raised other people children, and then when they got a certain age, they wanted to go back home. And right now, I'm raising two twins and their names are [Shacoria?] Reed and Corey Reed, and they both is 12, they're twins.

EF: Whose children are they?

MO: [00:51:02] They are a cousin of mine's children.

EF: They're very smart children.

MO: [00:51:06] Yes. And so, I had them ever since they came out the hospital, my husband and I. And so, he passed and I still have them.

EF: Now, tell me about your second husband.

MO: [00:51:18] My second husband, he worked on the farm, he drove the truck and different things.

EF: What was his name?

MO: [00:51:24] Donald Onley.

EF: Donald?

MO: [00:51:27] Onley. And then he worked on the farm he drove different, he drove trucks, he hauled stuff with trucks. And he was a foreman on the farm, a foreman. And so, we both were in the same field of work, but while he was the foreman over the tractors and the graders and stuff, I was the head of getting their crops done and picking up in people's and carrying on the work.

EF: So, you had a lot of responsibility.

MO: [00:52:09] Yeah, always had responsibility. And then, plus raising the kids, too. But...

[break in audio]

EF: Okay, now your children are with both of your husbands?

MO: [00:52:23] Yeah, I had children with, I had three with the first one, because my first husband, like I said, we were going to school and so I didn't marry him right away. I married my first husband a year before he passed, but I had already had three children. So, I had one with my second husband.

EF: Where do your children live?

MO: [00:52:49] My youngest son lives on my right, my oldest daughter lives on my left, and my oldest son and my middle son live about, I would say, two minutes from me down the street.

EF: That says something about your mothering.

MO: [00:53:11] Yes, well, it seemed like, I said to them after my husband died, their father died, I said, "I'm going to move to North Carolina," and they said, "Make sure you get a place big enough for everybody, or land enough for everybody because everybody is going to move with you." And so, right now, my children want to be everywhere I go. It's like, "Mama, you can't move off the Eastern Shore unless we move," and my daughter, she's married and she's telling her husband, "If Mama goes, I'm going."

EF: Where would you go in North Carolina?

MO: [00:53:42] Well, what happened before my husband died, we liked it. We liked North Carolina. And so, after that, we always said if we'd move, we would move to North Carolina, and start a business there, start Mama Girl business there. And so, but after my husband died, and I was looking after my mother, my mother liked Florida. And I didn't like Florida. And so, now she's like, "Well, we'll move to Florida," I'm like, "I don't like Florida." And so, what we agreed on, if she hadn't passed, we would move to Maryland, Salisbury. And I said, "Well, okay. I like Salisbury." She said she liked Salisbury. And so, that's the thing. But right now, the way I feel that, I love Eastern Shore, Virginia. And I'm here for a while.

EF: Yeah, I think it loves you. Except for your allergies, whatever...

MO: [00:54:37] That's the only problem I have on the Eastern Shore, is my allergies. And I mean, during the winter I do fine because no I'm not in and outside that much, but in the summer, I'm really sick, and I don't know where my shop will always be where I live at, and I don't know what the spirit would tell me, whether to move my shop out from where I live at, but

other than that, I'll stay until the spirit tells me something.

EF: I do have a question for you. I'm curious if any of your children, or you think any of your grandchildren would carry on your art, is anybody interested in learning?

MO: [00:55:21] Well, I will say this. When I first started out, my oldest son, he was very much involved in the artwork with me. Very much involved. And I mean, right today, I really believe that there's no piece that the spirit had gave me that he wouldn't be able to make. But would they carry it on right now? I really wouldn't know because he don't like art. And my middle son would love it, but he's not as artistic as my oldest son. But my grandson, he has a sight in him. He took some paper and I took some paper, and he began to make, and I began to make, even though I had to finish it, but...

EF: How old is he?

MO: [00:56:21] He's 11.

EF: Oh, this is not Corey.

MO: [00:56:24] No, that's Deandre, he is my oldest grandson. That's Deandre. And I mean, he's very what you call, but I can't say he would take over because

he's more into the ministry, right now, because even he just showed me just this morning, he showed me yesterday but I read it today, he had wrote a sermon for our congregation. And so, I'm not saying that he would really do it, but I don't know, but I'm really... I got a real strong belief if today I will say that I'm no longer going to do the artwork anymore, that one of my children would take over.

EF: That's good.

MO: [00:57:12] Yeah. I've got a strong belief that, even if the middle boy, he's in law enforcement, I think he would even come out of that. And so, but my oldest son, I don't know yet because it's hard to get him back into art.

EF: Have you actually taught anybody else?

MO: [00:57:31] Well, no. The only one, I have showed a young lady, I can't think of her name, in Washington, she was a child, and they came in and I was finishing up something and I showed them how I would finish it and the only one I really showed, like I said, would be my grandson. I showed the twins that I'm raising but they're not interested. They're more interested in painting. And the little girl can really draw, and the little boy can draw. They can draw. But the

little girl, she used to paint plates and sell them. But what happened, the paint made her sick. She can't stand the paint. And so, the little boy, he's just a drawer. He's not interested, he's more interested in music.

EF: Do you know anybody else who does work like this?

MO: [00:58:23] Right off hand, I don't. I know people that do paper mâché, add but other than paper mâché, what I'm doing, I don't know anyone that's doing what I'm doing right now.

EF: What do you call what you do?

MO: [00:58:37] I call it newspaper sculpturing.

EF: Have you ever tried using other paper?

MO: [00:58:45] Well, yes. Someone went out and bought me some paper mâché material, and the only thing I can say, I thanked them, but I had to give it away because I didn't know what to do with it. I mean, they said, "Just put water in it," and I'm like, "Okay, I put water in it, what is it supposed to turn out to be?" And I never could get a form. And I told them, I said, "Well, it's just... I can't do it." And in the meantime, what was so funny about it, after they gave it to me, I ordered some. And so, what I did, I gave

it to schools because I didn't know what to do with it.

EF: Have you gone into schools at all to demonstrate or talk about your art?

MO: [00:59:24] I have been into quite a few schools. I have been in quite a few colleges to talk about my artwork, and to tell them where I came from. They originally will say, "Well, I've taught," and I tell them, "I'm not self-anything." I said, "The spirit is still teaching." And so, they might not understand the way I explain it, but that's the only way I know how to explain it, because then they ask me, I have had them to ask me to teach a class to show them how to make it, and I said, "I can't show anyone because I'm still learning." And they say, "These many years you haven't learned yet?" I said, "Nope," I said, "I'm still learning." I said, "How in the world can you learn how to do something when as soon as you finish, it's taken away from you?" And so, that's the way I explained it. That's the only way I know how to explain it.

EF: What do you mean it's taken away?

MO: [01:00:21] Well, it's like, as soon as the spirit shows me how to make it, and matter of fact, not only

he shows me how to make it, the whole time I'm making it, the spirit is dealing with me and telling me, "You need another piece of paper there," or either, "That's enough, you don't have to put nothing else on it, it's fine." And just as soon as it says, "It's fine," it's like, "What's the next thing I do? It's fine." So, that's gone. So, that's what I mean by not really knowing how to... when it's finished, the spirit let me know, "It's finished, now. It's time for it to dry."

EF: [01:01:03] How long do you take with a piece? I know you move through them rather quickly. Do you sit and go from beginning to end? How do you actually work with it?

MO: [01:01:13] Well, mostly if I'm working, unless somebody comes in and takes my attention, I work, if I start at eight o'clock, and I need to finish a piece, if that piece is not finished until 3:00 in the daytime, I will work constantly on that piece until I finish. And as, like today, I started... I'm starting out with chairs, so that means I don't have to stop in between, and when I have to stop in between, so now I've got to pray in order to get back to it. It's hard for me to stop in between and it go

back to what I had started. It's more better if I completely finish it, but sometimes, I can't. And sometimes, I don't get back to those pieces for months. And sometimes, the spirit allows me to go back. And so, even right now I'm praying, "Lord, please. I need to finish this. [laughs] I need to finish these pieces." And so, but sometimes all I can say is whatever the spirit allows me. And sometimes, it'll say, "That's it for tonight."

EF: Do you ever not finish a piece?

MO: [01:02:36] Yes. Yes. And when do I get to it? Sometimes it looks like I'm going to never get back to it.

EF: So, where is everything? Is everything here in this room?

MO: [01:02:47] I have everything in this room other than pieces that I'm keeping for myself just hanging on my wall or in the house somewhere. But other than that, all my artwork is right in this room. The pieces that's finished, the pieces that started, and the pieces that's drying, everything is right here.

EF: Well maybe we'll talk about those different stages tomorrow.

MO: [01:03:15] Okay.

EF: How is that?

MO: [01:03:17] That'd be fine.

EF: Because I think you need to get back to work.

MO: [01:03:21] Well, I don't know what time I'll get back, all I know is I will get back, but I don't know what time. Like I said, it might not be till ten o'clock when I get back to work.

EF: Do you sleep much?

MO: [01:03:33] Nope, I don't get much sleep. But does the work keep me from sleeping? No. The work don't keep me from sleep.

EF: Well, how do you get to have such bright eyes? You just always look so wide awake and happy.

MO: [01:03:46] You know, that's what a lot of people tell me but I don't even know it. I don't know. I don't know how. Because like I said, if I were to go to bed at 10:00, sometimes I get up 2:00, 3:00, but if the spirit wakes me up and say, "I want you to go in the shop," I go in the shop. And sometimes I get up and I don't go to bed, I pray. I pray. I'm one of the people that I thank my father for this, I pray a lot. I pray a whole lot. And that's the key. That's the key. I feel that's the key. That's what keeps me happy and I mean, if I wouldn't know somebody was

coming, when they come up here I'd be in here by myself and they wouldn't believe it. They would say, "What's going on in that house? Has she lost her mind?" That's the way I'd be going on in here, all by myself. I never really have a real bad lonesome moment. And if it is, then I know the spirit is trying to tell me something. And so, but that's the way it is. I feel good. And a lot of people say, "You've got such bright eyes and all of this," and I'll tell you what I do. I come home, if they tell me away from home, and look in the mirror, I say, "Now, tell me what they're seeing, I don't see it." But when it's time to sleep, the Lord lets me sleep.

EF: You just spent three days at a crafts fair. Did that not just exhaust you? Or does that give you... what kind of energy do you get?

MO: [01:05:33] I came home, I was so tired and I was planning on working, and it tickles me, I just knew I was going to work Saturday night when I got home. And just on my way home, the spirit said, didn't say it until I was on my way home not far from the house, said, "You don't have no glue." And I said to the spirit, I said, "Thank you. But I know what you want me to do. You want me to rest." And by the time I

walked in the door, I was so tired, I didn't know what to do. And I said, "That's why I couldn't work tonight, that's why I didn't have any glue." And Sunday night, I was planning on doing the same thing. Got the glue but was too tired to work. And so, when I get like that, I know it's time to rest. The spirit says, "Time to rest," I let everything go, I go to bed. That's it.

EF: Good for you. You know your limits.

MO: [01:06:36] Yeah. And I mean, I could be working in the shop, the spirit will say, "I need you to stop, get ready for bed." And it allows me to come down and do a certain portion, and then it says, "Okay, now go back. It's time to go to bed." So, I'm relying on the spirit of the Lord for everything. And when I'm not obedient, it lets me know. And so, that's what I'm relying on, just the spirit, for everything. And some people would say, "Why?" Because even this year, the shows that I generally do I mean a lot of them, I generally go to Georgia about five times a year, and I haven't been to Georgia this year. The spirit said, "No," and I didn't go.

EF: Tell me about your traveling. You really get around.

MO: [01:07:33] I love to travel.

EF: How do you travel?

MO: [01:07:36] Well, I've got a truck, a pickup, and I drive the pickup. And sometimes, with my mother was living, she never let me go alone. Some other family member or friend would have to go with me. And so, now most of the time, all of my boys, they have steady jobs, my daughter has a steady job, and so, sometimes the teacher will let Shacoria take off some days and go with me, and most of the travel now is with Shacoria, the one that I call my daughter that I'm raising, and then, now, since I've been in the church the church family, I have a young lady named [Linda Wiatts?], and so, what she does now, she don't have, she's done retired, and so, she travels with me, now. She said, anytime I would like to go anywhere, she said, "Just let me know."

EF: How do you feel about all this travelling, going to new places, and staying in hotels, probably?

MO: [01:08:37] Well, you know what? I never got a chance to travel, even being married twice, I never got a chance to travel. I worked all the time. I worked so much until I became a workaholic. I got about four hours of sleep a night, and I never got a chance to travel. And so, now, I enjoy traveling. I enjoy

meeting people. And even if I'm not going for art or going for the ministry, even when I go there's people that... I just meet people and start talking. I'm a talker. Now. I wasn't a talker, but now I am. And so, I just meet people. And it's so funny, though. I call myself meeting people, it seems like the people meet me because they'll walk up and say something, they'll say, something, "Lady, this lady here," and I'm like, "Can I help you lady? Can I do this for you?" And I'm like, "These people don't know me, why do they want to do this for me?" and I mean, so that's it. And I have met people that said, even to art shows and say, "Lady, do you have money?" And I say, "Yeah." "Well, lady, you sure you don't want money?" And these people totally don't know me from anywhere and they'll said to me, "You're just like an angel." And I'm like. "I'm no angel," you know? But that's how I meet them. I meet people everywhere. And I love people. I'm a person that really loves people. And even when God started me off with this artwork, it was like, I had been sick so long until I think I had grown to look mean, and by looking mean, I said, "Well, Lord, if I only could make people laugh and remove that look off their face," and I'm happy

because there are some times when some people walk in my shop, they just bust right out and start laughing. And one lady laughed until she cried. And I came and I said, "Ma'am, could I ask you what you are laughing at?" And she says, "I can't help myself. Your artwork makes me laugh." And she just kept on. And I mean, she left out of my shop, still laughing.

EF: Did she buy anything?

MO: [01:11:04] Yes. And she bought something. She said, "I can't help myself." And so, I find that a lot of people and even to the show that I just did this weekend, it's just they get right up and start smiling.

EF: Talking about smiling, look at this.

MO: [01:11:21] See?

EF: Look at that face on that cat.

MO: [01:11:24] They said the artwork makes them smile because of the faces on them. And this year, I'm dealing with more of the eyes on the animals and the people. It's something about the eyes that I really don't understand that God is telling me to deal with the eyes. And I don't know if it is because of mine, because I have people that tell me that, "Do you notice your eyes?" And I'm like, "How can I see my

own eyes? I don't look at the mirror. I'm a person, I'm not a mirror person." I can put on my clothes and never even look in the mirror. I can comb my hair and won't look in the mirror. And so, sometimes when I leave, I don't know how I look. I just go.

EF: I think there might be a really good lesson there because you look great.

MO: [01:12:14] Well, [laughs] I just don't know, I just say, "Well, I'm going." And so, I have some people say, "Well, you just don't... when people give you compliments, you don't know how to take it." I'll just say, "Oh." And go on.

EF: I'll bet you have people coming in here and don't understand your work and don't know what to say about it, too.

MO: [01:12:40] Well, I have people to come in here and they don't understand it and I'm not going to say don't understand the artwork, they don't understand me because when people walk in, it's like, I'm a person that has a Bible laying around and then some walk in it's like, "Oh, I can't," and I'm a person that's always talking about my father, I'm talking about spirits, and some people don't understand. And when I say, "Well, the spirit gives me the artwork," and then

they're like, "Oh, I don't want to be no part of that," you know? And so, they don't understand. And so, but and then some come in, they don't understand and they ask me to explain it, and then there are some that, even by talking to me on the phone, they begin to explain to their children right away. They explain to their children, "When you get there, you might see a Bible in her shop. You might see different art themes from the Bible. You might just... we don't know what she'll be talking about." And there are sometimes when people come in, the spirit won't allow me to say anything to them, other than speak to them. And so, that's all I do. I don't explain anything unless they ask. And then, there are some who come in, we'll get on the artwork, we'll leave from the artwork, we'll get to the ministry, we'll do it all. We'll have prayer together, and we'll just have a good time together. And so, to tell you the truth, I have met them and some are like, "I hate to leave your shop. I don't want to leave." I have one lady came and when she came back she brought me two presents. And she said, "I just believe you need something. I have to give you something because you is a part of me, now, and it seemed like I just want to be where

you're at." And she's saying, "I know I can't be why you is at," and she offered to tutor my children, free of charge. She said, "If I can only do something for you."

EF: Did she tutor them?

MO: [01:14:47] Well, I haven't called her, yet. They're pretty good in school. And so, right now, they don't need any help right now. And so, but...

END OF AUDIO FILE